

CHAPTER IV

CLIENT SATISFACTION

Client attitudes and perceptions provide valuable insight into the reasons for the success—or lack of success—of each demonstration. A key aspect of the evaluation was documenting these attitudes and perceptions to understand how the demonstrations affected client satisfaction. This was accomplished through a series of focus groups and surveys tailored to each of the demonstrations.

In general, seniors responded favorably to the demonstrations, showing an appreciation for the efforts to make the FSP more accessible. Seniors' levels of satisfaction appeared to be tied to the amount and quality of personal interactions with demonstration staff. Seniors lauded the respect and sense of dignity that they received from staff at some demonstration sites, but expressed frustration with staff interactions at other sites. In describing the barriers to participation, seniors echoed the results of earlier research. In particular, they confirmed that many seniors do not know about the FSP and many others assume they are not eligible. Others find the burden of applying, plus the stigma of participating, to be costs that outweigh the program's frequently small benefits.

In this chapter, we describe the impacts of the demonstrations on client satisfaction. The approach taken to gauging client satisfaction differed depending on the demonstration model. In the simplified eligibility and application assistance sites, focus groups were used to answer the key research questions pertaining to clients' experiences with the demonstration. In the commodity alternative benefit demonstrations, telephone interviews were conducted with demonstration participants—as well as with elderly FSP participants who had not been part of the commodity demonstration—to explore a set of research questions more detailed than were tested in the simplified eligibility and application assistance sites.

SIMPLIFIED ELIGIBILITY AND APPLICATION ASSISTANCE DEMONSTRATIONS

In the four demonstrations that adopted either the simplified eligibility or the application assistance demonstrations, the interventions focused primarily on changing the application process. A principal objective in examining client attitudes at these sites was to

obtain their assessment of a given demonstration's ability to reduce barriers to FSP participation. The core set of research questions included:

1. What are the reasons that eligible elderly individuals do not participate in the FSP (in the absence of the demonstration)?
2. To what extent were elderly FSP applicants aware of the demonstration in their community?
3. Did clients perceive the demonstration's application process to be more convenient, simpler, and less costly than the regular food stamp process?

Two focus groups were conducted at each of these four demonstration sites. Focus group participants included elderly FSP clients who had used the demonstration to apply for food stamps within the previous three months. The focus groups were held between November 2003 and February 2004. Each focus group lasted about two hours and had, on average, seven participants. Respondents were paid \$25 for participating. Each focus group was led by a professional moderator following protocols designed expressly for each demonstration.

Five key themes came out of these focus groups. First, the groups affirmed existing research on barriers to FSP participation for seniors. Second, clients' levels of awareness about the demonstrations varied, based on the demonstration outreach. Third, clients were extremely satisfied with the demonstrations, particularly in sites where demonstration staff were skilled at making strong connections with seniors. Fourth, medical costs and access to medical benefits were crucial issues to these seniors and were central to their needs. Finally, despite numerous problems in using the technology, seniors had a favorable view of electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards.

It should be noted that the point of the focus groups was to develop insight into key issues rather than to derive precise measures of the frequency of events. Because of a limited number of respondents, and because respondent groups consisted only of demonstration participants, caution should be used when generalizing from the focus group findings. The value of the focus groups was that they provided observers with unfiltered comments from demonstration participants, which helped to clarify key issues.

Reasons for Nonparticipation

The barriers to FSP participation cited by demonstration participants were consistent with those identified through earlier research (see Chapter I). Seniors in each of the demonstration sites commented on a general lack of program awareness among the elderly (a lack of awareness about the program itself for some, and about eligibility criteria for others). The other barriers can be viewed in the framework of the economic decision to apply for food stamps. The focus group participants made it clear that given low program benefits (many were eligible for only \$10 per month), the costs of applying need not be too high to discourage participation. Also, the costs that were most frequently discussed were not financial costs, but rather the application burden and the stigma of using food stamp

benefits. Evidence from the focus groups suggests that these costs did not need to be lowered substantially to encourage participation. When applying through the demonstration at a senior center, one client in Michigan put it well, saying seniors had “nothing to lose.”

The remainder of this section discusses the comments that focus group participants made concerning the lack of awareness of the FSP and the application burden and stigma.

Lack of Awareness about the FSP

Many of the clients who entered the FSP through these demonstrations had limited prior knowledge of the program. Several clients stated that they did not know they might be eligible for food stamps, in part because they had never given it much thought. Others knew about the program but did not realize it was available for seniors.

“I always was under the impression that you had to be broke, out of a job, with children, you know.” [A client in Arizona]

“That’s the way it was in [my apartment building] until this lady from the [food stamp] office came over and talked to us. A lot of them in the building didn’t know that they could get food stamps.” [A client in Florida]

“It was scary because I thought this would be helpful but I’m not sure if I was eligible. I didn’t know what that was all about, I didn’t know what the assets were, or anything, so that was a little scary.” [A client in Maine]

In many of the sites, clients described feelings of relief that resulted from encountering either the demonstration or the FSP itself. They described the benefits as making a significant difference in their ability to make ends meet each month. This made it clear that the clients’ prior knowledge of the program had been limited.

Even more common among clients was the perception that, while *they* may have known about the Food Stamp Program before participating, they believed most of the other seniors they knew were not aware of the program. Across all four sites, clients described a widespread lack of awareness about the FSP or other assistance programs.

“[Seniors don’t apply for food stamps] because they figure they have too many assets. That they wouldn’t qualify. And that they’re not low income. We don’t think of ourselves as being low income.” [A client in Michigan]

“There are some people who don’t know that they can go somewhere and get their utility bills paid, or go somewhere and collect commodities. They just don’t know.” [A client in Maine]

One of the most telling points was that at each of the four sites, clients suggested that one way to improve the demonstration would be to provide more outreach. They consistently

felt that the demonstrations were so helpful, and that knowledge of the FSP was so limited, that more seniors would benefit if they simply knew about the program. This sentiment was expressed at every site, regardless of the level of outreach already conducted by the demonstration. This underscores the fact that, at least among the elderly FSP clients, the perception was that knowledge of the FSP was limited.

Application Burden

Seniors that had prior experience with the FSP typically felt that the entire application process was confusing, and that too often they had been given incomplete or incorrect information about the application process. To them, the paperwork requirements were daunting, especially because they perceived much of the paperwork to be unnecessary (they often felt that the office had most of the information already on file, or that the workers easily could have gotten the information through access to other electronic records). Many seniors expressed frustration that it was never made clear to them what paperwork they needed to submit, and this led to multiple interactions with the caseworkers.

“[If I had to go to the Food Stamp Office,] I would have never, never have applied for those food stamps. Never.”

-A client in Florida

“And then you got to bring your social security number, rent receipts, phone receipts, cable bill and all that, and then you got to write on every piece of paper how you, if you, how much you get, how much you make, how much the telephone bill is and all that.” [A client in Florida]

Seniors were particularly vexed by the personal interactions at FSP offices. They indicated that eligibility workers at local offices sometimes did not treat them with respect or dignity. As one client in Arizona explained, “I’ve had a lot of seniors tell me they won’t sign up because it wasn’t worth the problems.” Another client in Florida indicated that the entire process was intimidating because “they ask so many questions.”

“They take and drill me. I sit there and answer all the questions they ask me.” [A client in Florida]

The added application burden of travel to the FSP office was discussed at two of the demonstration sites—Maine and Florida. At these sites, several clients complained that the costs of traveling to the FSP office were high enough—and the benefits low enough—to discourage them from even applying.

Application burden was most relevant for those who expected low benefits. Among the focus group participants, many were receiving low benefits, and much of the discussion focused on the perception that most seniors get only \$10 in benefits. Referring to their experiences prior to the demonstration, clients made statements such as:

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"I mean, the attitude [at the food stamp office] is so bad, for \$10, you feel like you don't keep your sanity. Just stay at home." [A client in Florida]

"I wasn't going to fill out that monstrous thing just for a lousy \$10. No way." [A client in Arizona]

"I don't get enough for the time that I spent [at the food stamp office] for the interview. Time is not worth it." [A client in Florida]

It is noteworthy that these were clients who participated in the demonstration, suggesting that the application burden was still low enough under demonstration rules to make the small benefits worth the trouble of applying.

Stigma

Stigma clearly registered as a major issue for many of the clients. While it is unclear the extent to which stigma alone would prevent an elderly individual from participating in the FSP, stigma was a persistent concern among focus group members. Clients described the perception that various types of people look down on them for using food stamps. Many discussed the shopping experience itself, and how they believed that other shoppers viewed them with contempt. Some described instances where other shoppers made comments about food stamp recipients eating better than others—one respondent felt that other shoppers moved to a different check-out line to avoid being near someone with food stamps.

"When you've had a good life and you've worked hard all your life and then all of a sudden, boom, you don't have nothing. And it's embarrassing to have to admit."

-A client in Arizona

"I lived in this town all my life and I knew everybody practically who's in the grocery store and it was humiliating." [A client in Arizona]

"I've heard people say, 'people on food stamps eat better than me.'" [A client in Michigan]

"You go into a store and you're going to buy something with food stamps and somebody is standing beside you, they kind of look at you like you're a second class person." [A client in Maine]

*"People not only look down on you, they look **at** you."* [A client in Michigan]

Clients at several sites described the perception that store clerks also acted irritated if they used food stamps. In Michigan, focus group participants traded views on which stores were the most accepting of people who use food stamps. In some discussions of shopping experiences, clients clearly were describing experiences with the old paper coupons, not the EBT cards. Nevertheless, it is significant that many clients perceived the use of food stamps as very visible to other shoppers and store clerks.

The stigma during the shopping experience was not the only concern for clients. Many felt embarrassed about what their friends and family thought.

"I didn't want anybody to know about it because people would look down on me for using food stamps." [A client in Maine]

"My family would look down on me." "I didn't tell my son for a long time." [Clients in Michigan]

Part of the perceived stigma seemed to stem from deep-rooted pride among seniors. Many explained that they had worked all their lives and never had to rely on public assistance. They carried negative views of public assistance that they said they had developed early in life. The sentiment expressed by this Michigan client was common across sites:

"I just feel terrible to have anyone help me. You're supposed to stand on your own two feet!"

Some clients in the demonstrations tried to recruit other seniors to participate. Several described resistance related to stigma. A client in Michigan explained that seniors are "very difficult to convince" because "we're stubborn," and applying for food stamps forces a person to admit they need help.

A less common view was that, by receiving food stamps, seniors were taking benefits away from other people who might need them more. (This view has been documented in previous research, as seen in the work of Ponza and McConnell, 1996.) For example, in Maine, one client said she would leave the program once she felt she did not need benefits so that someone else could have them. This view, while not directly related to stigma, reveals the pride that seniors feel in being independent and in not relying on public assistance.

Awareness of Demonstration Varied by the Amount and Type of Outreach

For a demonstration to be successful, seniors must be aware of its services. During the focus groups, clients were encouraged to discuss what they knew about the demonstrations and how they had learned about them.

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For the application assistance sites, where each demonstration was operated under a separate name, name recognition was a useful measure of client awareness. For two of these three demonstrations—the FACES program in Maine and the MiCAFE program in Michigan—name recognition was high. When shown the name of the program, clients could readily describe what the program did, and in the case of the FACES program, could name key staff members. In both cases, clients perceived them as distinct programs operated separately from the FSP (a goal of both demonstrations was to appear to be separate from the FSP). In Arizona, name recognition was low. Even though all of the clients participating in the focus groups had entered the FSP through the FANS program, most did not recognize the program name. Most clients assumed that the assistants who helped them were FSP employees. While these issues of name recognition were not definitive measures of the degree to which seniors were aware of the demonstration, they provided some insight. In particular, in Arizona, if clients who used the FANS program did not recognize the program by name or description, it is likely that many (or most) seniors were unaware that the application assistance services were available.

“A lady came... on my birthday and she knocked on the door and she said, ‘Happy Birthday...!’ I didn’t know what she was doing there. So I asked her in and she explained that she was from this program and that they could help if I needed some help.... Well, I needed a heap!”

—A client in Maine

Clients described how they had heard about the demonstration. These experiences varied by site and reflected the outreach strategies employed by the different demonstrations.

- **Florida.** In Florida, several respondents said they had seen the public service announcement promoting food assistance for seniors. This advertisement, which featured the Secretary of the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF), did not mention the FSP by name (as a way to avoid stigma). Clients seemed to remember the advertisement because of the images of a woman using her EBT card in a store. Other seniors indicated that they learned of the FSP through a letter they received in the mail.
- **Arizona.** In Arizona, most of the focus group participants seemed to have learned about the FANS program by word-of-mouth, or by chance. Some were contacting the Arizona Department of Economic Security for assistance. Others heard of the program through a doctor or a food bank. Only a few clients said that they had been approached by FANS representatives at a senior center—one of the main outreach activities of the demonstration.

- **Maine.** In Maine, several clients had been approached by FACES staff directly, either at their homes or in other community settings. Other clients learned of the program through word-of-mouth. In a few cases, the clients' children learned of the FACES program and encouraged those clients to participate. This also reflects the FACES outreach strategy of in-person and door-to-door promotion of the program.
- **Michigan.** Clients in Michigan learned of the program primarily through their senior center, a reflection of the primary outreach strategy for MiCAFE. The ways in which they heard about MiCAFE at the senior centers were varied. Some heard from center staff, others from print publications (fliers or the centers' newsletters). As was the case with other sites, some clients learned of the program via word-of-mouth.

The finding that focus group participants tended to learn of a demonstration through its outreach efforts should not be surprising. However, this finding underscores the importance of outreach in making these demonstrations successful.

Clients Had High Levels of Satisfaction with Demonstrations

Overall, clients were extremely satisfied with the demonstrations. In many cases, not having to be in the local FSP office and deal with FSP staff was a primary source of satisfaction. At application assistance sites, seniors were grateful for the assistance and were appreciative of the personal interactions with demonstration staff. In most cases, the only negative issues they described pertained to the FSP in general, not to the demonstrations. However, there were some negative comments made concerning some of the demonstrations.

Positive Reactions

Across all sites, clients were glad that they did not need to travel to the local office to apply for food stamps. Clients that had prior experience dealing with the FSP offices directly made it clear that the application assistance process was much easier.

"Most people don't like to ask for help. [Application assistance] makes it much easier to accept the help when you don't have to go to the DES and see everybody there." [A client in Arizona]

"When the worker comes to your home to request something, it's right here where you can get it." [A client in Arizona]

"I'm glad that the senior center would do it all." [A client in Michigan]

"I think being able to go to the center is—I would have never gone downtown. I wouldn't even have known about it." [A client in Michigan]

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“If we would have had to travel, well, I don’t know how many miles it would be for me but I might have just of said ‘forget it.’” [A client in Michigan]

Clients in Florida also appreciated the reduction in the amount of information they needed to provide. As one client said, the process was easier because seniors did not have to “give them all of our personal business.” Another client in Florida said:

“Some lady come...from the food stamp office and explained to us about food stamps and we signed a paper and told how much our income was and what our medical bill was...and that’s all we had to do.”

At the application assistance sites, demonstration staff played a significant role in generating positive experiences. Clients responded well to the personal interactions. They felt that application assistants treated them with respect and they appreciated the care shown by the assistants. Indeed, clients repeatedly used the term “dignity” in describing how they were treated by the application assistants. They felt that the assistants were “courteous,” and this helped reduce the stress of the application process. One Michigan client said that the assistants made her feel that it was “acceptable to apply.”

“The person comes to your home and they’re very comfortable, make you more comfortable.” [A client in Maine]

“The lady that interviewed me and took the application was wonderful. She made you feel very, very hopeful, optimistic.” [A client in Michigan]

“FANS indicates a dignity. It’s a psychological thing with FANS. You don’t associate it with food stamps. It leaves you with your dignity.” [A client in Arizona]

“I will say... they are very, very helpful for me to get the information. They went overboard.” [A client in Arizona]

“[The MiCAFE staff] don’t make you feel inferior.” [A client in Michigan]

Clients in Michigan found that the tailored list of verification documentation generated through the MiCAFE intake process was extremely helpful in navigating the application process.

Many clients who had not been aware of the program also expressed gratitude for the food stamp benefits themselves. While some said things like “it takes the pressure off a little,” other clients showed even more appreciation, saying, “It’s a godsend”; and “I was tickled to death.”

“[having food stamps] has given me some more freedom so I don’t have to scrimp and save the way I was trying to make ends meet. I’m very grateful for it.” [A client in Maine]

“I don’t have to push as hard... it’s been a load off my mind; it was feeling kind of heavy trying to make ends meet.” [A client in Maine, speaking about food stamps and other FACES assistance]

It should be noted that, in Maine, another unambiguous source of satisfaction was related to the fact that the FACES program provided seniors with access to more than just food stamps. As discussed in a later section, seniors were extremely grateful for the assistance provided in accessing numerous medical benefits.

Negative Reactions

Clients also used the focus groups to express frustrations about the FSP in general and about the demonstrations in particular.

At most sites, the focus of these frustrations were issues outside of the control of the demonstrations. The most common complaints focused on the perceived inadequacy of the program benefits (especially among those receiving the \$10 minimum benefit), and the fact that increases in Social Security payments lead to decreases in food stamp benefits. Clients also complained about the inability to use food stamps for items other than food. As discussed later, they expressed frustrations with using the EBT technology. In Arizona and Michigan, clients complained about the long lag between the time they submitted their applications and when they received their benefits (a lag not attributable to demonstration procedures).

Arizona was the only site at which clients made negative comments about the demonstration itself. Some clients felt that the application assistants were underqualified. They suggested that the assistants needed more training to do their jobs and that there was “room for improvement.” This is consistent with other evidence (discussed in Chapter II) that some application assistants in Arizona were not well suited for the demonstration and that these personnel issues may have affected the demonstration’s impacts. Clients in Arizona also expressed frustration about the fingerprinting and photographing requirements imposed by the state. Initially, individuals applying through the demonstration in Arizona were required to go to the local DES office to be fingerprinted and photographed. This requirement was eventually dropped for these individuals.

“I honestly didn’t give a damn about food stamps; I was interested in the medical. Food stamps were immaterial because if it wasn’t for the medical, my wife and I would be in the ground.”

–A client in Maine

Medical Costs Were a Crucial Issue for Seniors

The experience of the FACES program in Maine serves to underscore the importance of medical benefits to the low-income elderly population. The FACES program essentially marketed access to a wide array of public assistance benefits. The staff often would promote medical benefits as the main aspect of the program. Once they got the client interested in applying for those benefits, they then promoted access to other programs, including food stamps and other food assistance programs, as well as programs such as energy assistance.

By all accounts, the Maine approach worked well. The FACES staff believed that medical expenses, not food, were typically the top concern for low-income seniors, a belief that was corroborated by discussions in the focus groups. The two focus groups in Maine were dominated by discussions of medical costs and how the medical benefits they received through FACES affected their lives.

“The convenience of it for me was the medical side of it...The food stamp part of it, that’s immaterial. The medical side is what we were concerned with.”

“...Insurance was just killing me. I had to drop Blue Shield. I just couldn’t afford it. Yes, [FACES] is a very, very convenient program.”

“I was paying \$60 a month for [each prescription], [for] just one, and now I pay \$2.50. That’s a heck of a drop from where it was. It’s a blessing on top of a blessing, really.”

Clients in Maine indicated that access to the medical benefits was the best part of the FACES program.

Discussions of medical costs were not limited to Maine. Clients in all demonstration sites discussed high medical expenses, often as a constraint on their ability to meet other basic needs. Some saw food stamps as a way to bridge the gap caused by rising medical expenses.

“Years ago I didn’t think I’d ever, ever have to get food stamps. But you change your mind once your insurance goes up and your medicine goes up...” [A client in Florida]

Seniors Had Favorable Assessment of EBT

On balance, the seniors participating in the focus groups had a positive view of EBT cards. Clients felt that using the cards substantially reduced the visibility of shopping with food stamps. They liked the fact that other shoppers could not tell they were using food stamps. They also felt that store clerks were more accepting of them when they used the EBT cards.

“That’s the best thing: the card.” [A client in Florida]

“All you do is swipe your card instead of everybody in line knowing, you know, that you were buying by food stamps.” [A client in Maine]

“I like everything about [the card] because it’s better than the food stamps.... As far as people staring at you, it’s like they just don’t know.” [A client in Michigan]

“You have that card instead of having to pull out food stamps, and you don’t feel so stressed out.” [A client in Arizona]

In some focus groups, clients suggested that EBT cards should be used to promote the FSP. They felt that if more seniors knew about the cards they would be more willing to participate in the program.

The seniors also had some frustration in using the EBT cards. The most common frustration was difficulty in finding out how much money was left on a card. Several clients described embarrassing situations in which, because they did not know how to find the balances on their cards, they were told at the checkout that they had insufficient funds to pay for their groceries. Clients also complained about difficulties in navigating the telephone information system for EBT-related questions. Finally, they seemed to misunderstand how long the benefits lasted on the card, with some believing benefits would not carry over from month to month.

COMMODITY ALTERNATIVE BENEFIT DEMONSTRATIONS

Because the commodity alternative benefit demonstrations were such a substantial departure from the traditional FSP procedures, clients’ experiences with these demonstrations were markedly different from what their experiences might have been in the traditional FSP, and these differences were encountered each month. As a result, clients could be satisfied or dissatisfied with the demonstration for a variety of reasons. To explore these reasons with a large sample of clients, telephone surveys were employed in the two commodity alternative benefit demonstrations. The samples included demonstration participants as well as elderly FSP participants who had not been part of the demonstrations. In general, the research questions explored by the survey included:

1. Why did clients in the areas served by the commodity alternative demonstrations choose to select the commodity option? Which items in the package were most attractive to potential clients?
2. How satisfied were clients with the various aspects of the commodity demonstration?
3. What were the costs to the client of participating in the demonstration?

4. Why did those seniors who received traditional FSP benefits decide not to participate in the commodity demonstration?

These questions had competing implications for the timing of the surveys. Because several questions concerned clients' reasons for selecting (or not selecting) the demonstrations, it was important to interview clients shortly after their participation decisions to minimize problems associated with recall. However, other important questions concerned the clients' experiences with the demonstrations, and this made it important to interview clients after they had received at least a couple of commodity packages. To address these competing issues, respondents were selected randomly from among elderly FSP clients residing in the demonstration site and from among those who had applied or were recertified for food stamps during the previous three months.¹

Separate samples of clients were selected three times—once every three months over a nine month period from July 2003 through March 2004. In most cases, demonstration participants had between two and four months of participation in the program. Out of a total of 604 sampled individuals, 211 demonstration participants and 259 traditional FSP participants completed interviews, reflecting an overall response rate of 77.8 percent (Table IV.1).² The sample in Connecticut was larger than the sample in North Carolina because more individuals applied and recertified during the sample window; however, the response rates were similar for the two demonstration sites. The response rates were much higher for demonstration participants (85.4 percent) than for non-demonstration participants (72.5 percent). This may have reflected more willingness among demonstration participants to talk about a program that was new and different.

Sampling weights were developed for analyzing the survey responses. The weights reflected the sample universe for each demonstration site: *all elderly households that applied for or were recertified for food stamps during the nine months from July 2003 through March 2004*.³ Based on data available at the time of sampling, some nonresponse bias was apparent. Specifically, among nondemonstration participants (those receiving traditional FSP benefits), seniors over age 80 were much less likely to respond to the survey than those under age 80 (these differences did not exist among demonstration participants). To account for these differences, nonresponse adjustments were included in the sampling weights.

¹ While ongoing FSP clients could opt to participate in the commodity demonstration at any point, it was assumed that most decisions to participate in the demonstration would be made either at the time of application or at recertification.

² Respondents received a \$15 incentive for participating in the survey.

³ See Appendix E for details on sampling weights.

Table IV.1: Commodity Alternative Benefit Demonstration Satisfaction Surveys: Sample Sizes and Response Rates

	Sample Size	Respondents	Response Rate (Percent)
Connecticut			
Demonstration Participants	107	92	86.0
Non-Demonstration Participants	206	149	72.3
Total	313	241	77.0
North Carolina			
Demonstration Participants	140	119	85.0
Non-Demonstration Participants	151	110	72.8
Total	291	229	78.7
Total, Demonstration Participants	247	211	85.4
Total, Non-Demonstration Participants	357	259	72.5
Total, Combined	604	470	77.8

To better understand the rationale behind decisions to participate or not participate in the commodity demonstrations, follow-up interviews were conducted with a small subsample of the survey respondents. During this follow-up interview, semistructured were intentionally selected based on their responses to the initial questions: 12 respondents were not participating in the demonstration, 13 respondents were participating in the demonstration and generally were satisfied, and 5 respondents were participating in the demonstration and were not satisfied with some component of the demonstration.⁴ The follow-up interviews typically were conducted within four to six weeks of the initial interviews. Quotations cited in this section were obtained through these follow-up interviews.

The remainder of this section discusses the results of these surveys. We begin by describing the reasons clients selected commodities. Next, we present some of the self-reported characteristics of those clients receiving commodities. Finally, we discuss clients' satisfaction with the commodity demonstrations. The results show that clients who selected the commodity demonstration did so in large part because they felt they would get more food than with regular food stamps, and many clients also wanted to try something new. Clients who did not select the demonstration wanted to retain control over their shopping

⁴ The low number of dissatisfied clients included in the follow-up interviews reflects the fact that few demonstration participants indicated dissatisfaction with the demonstration.

Table IV.2: Commodity Demonstrations Take-Up Rates

	Number	Percent
Elderly Households that Recently Applied or Recertified		
Total	3,109	100.0
Received Commodities	469	15.1
Never Received Commodities	2,640	84.9
Connecticut		
Total	2,613	100.0
Received Commodities	183	7.0
Never Received Commodities	2,430	93.0
North Carolina		
Total	496	100.0
Received Commodities	286	57.7
Never Received Commodities	210	42.3

Source: Commodity satisfaction surveys in Connecticut and North Carolina.

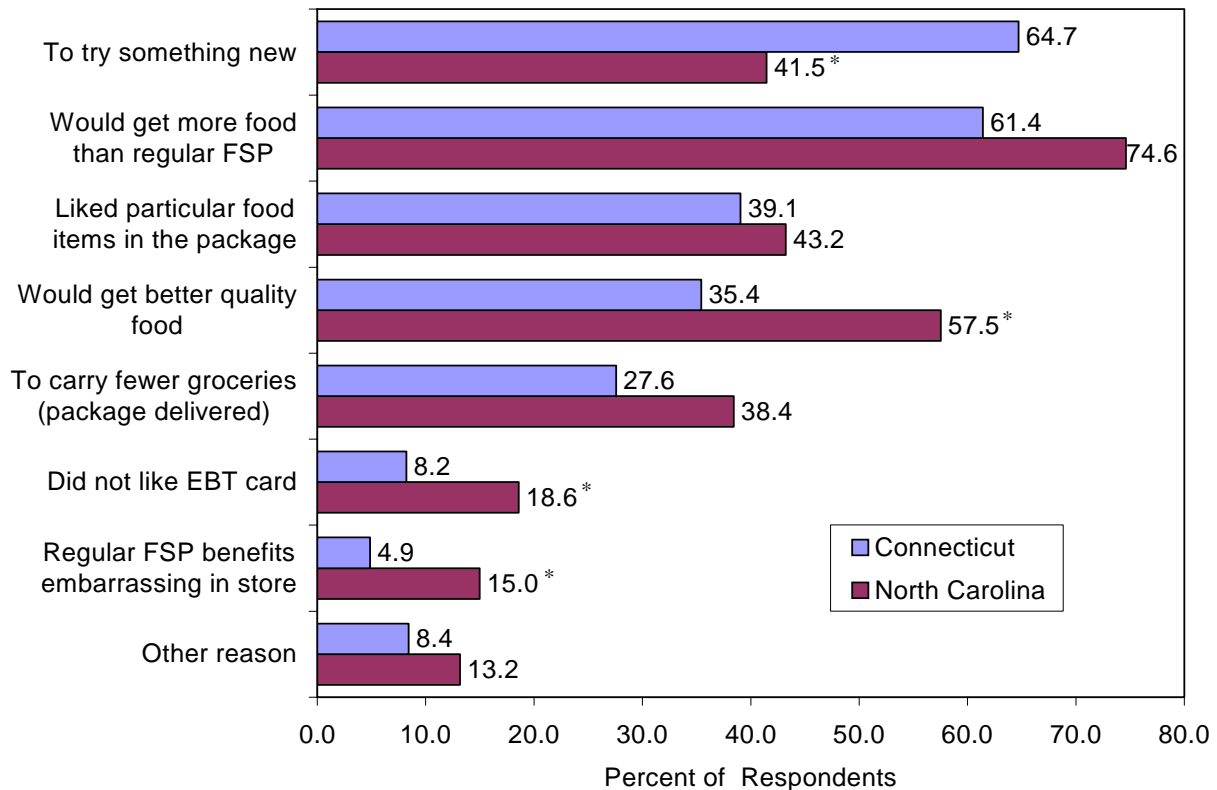
Note: Households were defined as receiving commodities if they participated in the commodity demonstration for at least one month before the interview.

decisions. Clients generally reported that they were satisfied with the demonstrations, but there were differences between the two sites. In Connecticut, clients said they were somewhat satisfied with the program, but most did not intend to continue with it. Their concerns focused on the demonstration staff and the distribution process. In North Carolina, clients were consistently very satisfied with the demonstration and most intended to continue participating.

Reasons for Choosing Commodities

Of the 3,100 elderly households in Connecticut and North Carolina that either entered the FSP or were recertified during the sample window, 15 percent chose to participate in the commodity demonstration (Table IV.2).⁵ The take-up rates were substantially higher in North Carolina, where 58 percent of households participated in the demonstration, than in Connecticut, where only 7 percent of households participated in the demonstration.

⁵ Households are defined as receiving commodities if they participated in the commodity demonstration for at least one month before the interview.

Figure IV.1: Reasons Given for Selecting Commodities Rather Than EBT Benefits

Note: Clients could provide more than one reason.

*Significantly different from Connecticut (alpha = 0.05).

When asked why they chose to participate in the demonstration, one of the most common responses in both states was that clients felt they would get more food through the demonstration than through traditional FSP benefits (Figure IV.1).⁶ Clients also were interested in trying something new, and many felt they would get better quality food from the demonstration than from using food stamps. In both demonstration sites, close to 40 percent of clients said they were attracted to the demonstration by particular food items in the basket. The most common items identified as attractive in both sites included canned fruits, vegetables, and beans. In North Carolina, where frozen meat was provided, frozen meat was viewed as attractive to clients (Table IV.3).

⁶ Clients were given a pre-set list of reasons for participating and could choose as many as applied. Among respondents who said there was some other reason for participating, the reason often was a specific recommendation from a caseworker or someone else.

Table IV.3: Commodity Package Items That Were Attractive to Clients

Connecticut		North Carolina	
Item	Percent of Respondents	Item	Percent of Respondents
Canned Fruit	67.6	Canned Fruit	54.7
Canned Vegetables	58.8	Frozen Chicken	54.5
Canned Juices	55.1	Frozen Beef	44.9
Canned Beans	48.5	Canned Vegetables	40.5
Tuna	44.9	Canned Beans	36.8

Note: Items shown were the five most frequently cited by respondents as attractive; most items were identified as attractive by at least some of the respondents.

“The fruit, the tuna fish. The cheese is very good. The butter. It’s all good. Soups.” [A client in Connecticut]

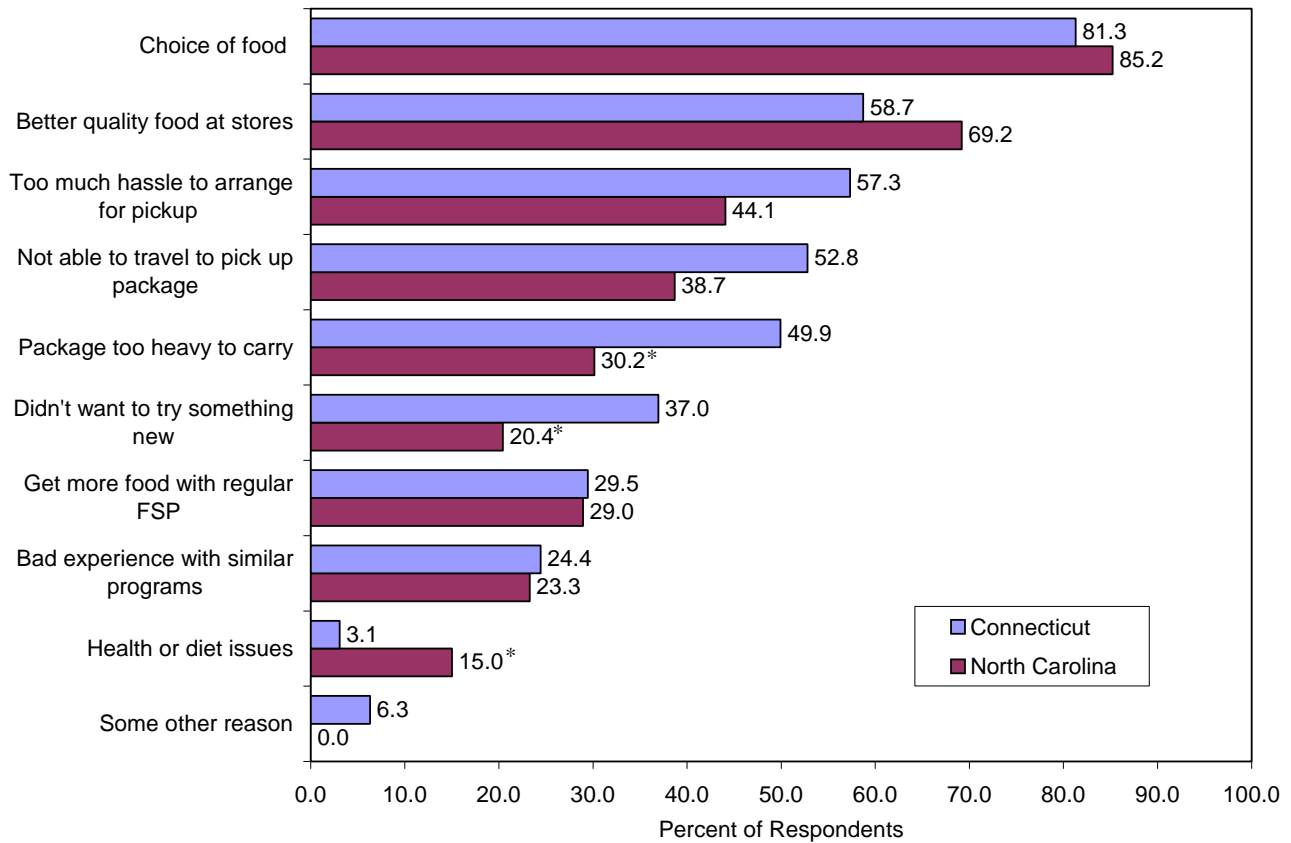
Among clients not participating in the demonstration, more than 80 percent said that they preferred to do their own shopping and felt they could get better quality food that way (Figure IV.2).⁷ During the follow-up interviews, it was evident that these clients preferred to retain control over their shopping experiences:

“I can go to the grocery store and... pick out what I want, and eat what I want, you know, get what I want.” [A client in North Carolina]

“When I go to the grocery store... I can pick out the best, you know, the vegetables, fresh vegetables, fruit, whatever, whatever.... So I figure why should I get the food package when I have the food stamp?” [A client in Connecticut]

“If I’m going to eat [beans], I’d rather buy the frozen and cook them. The canned ones have too much salt in them and sodium.” [A client in North Carolina]

⁷ Clients were given a pre-set list of reasons for participating and could choose as many as applied.

Figure IV.2: Reasons Given for Not Selecting Commodities

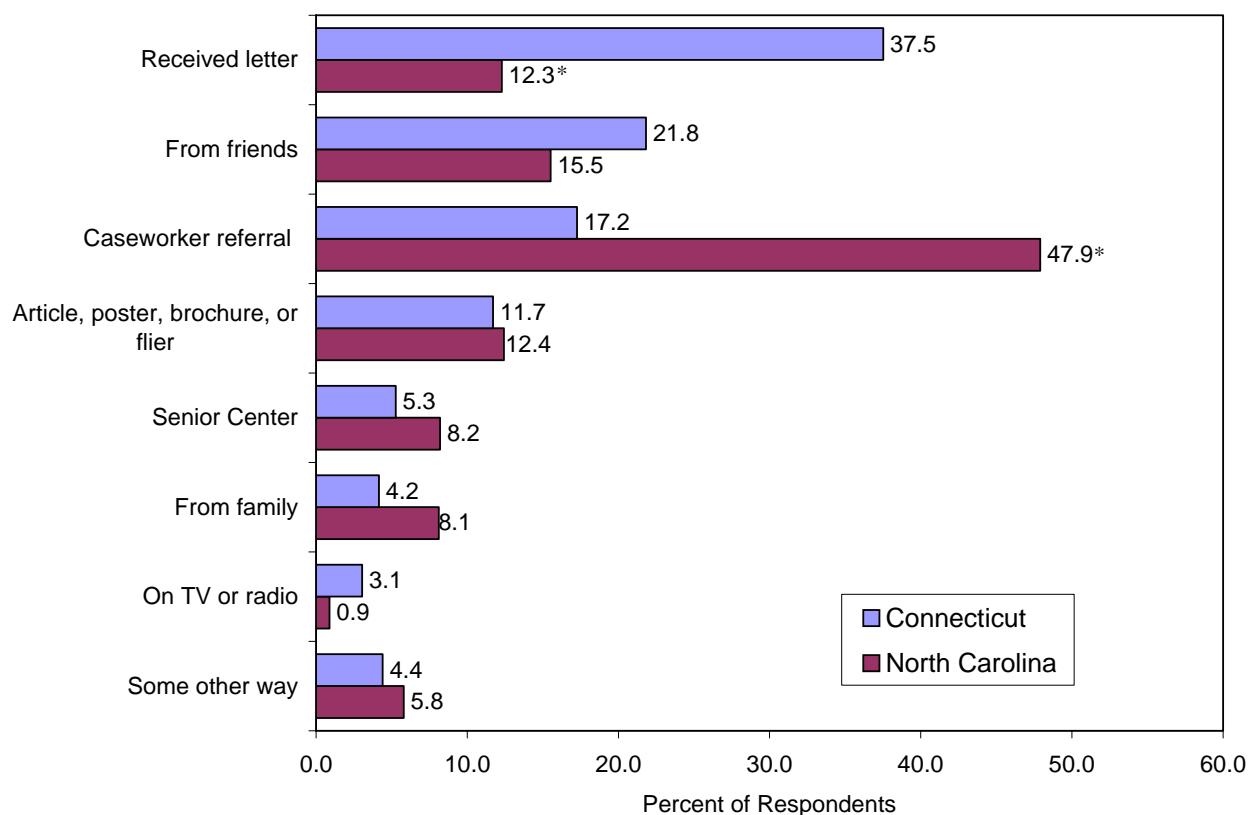
Note: Clients could provide more than one reason.

*Significantly different from Connecticut (alpha = 0.05).

Several clients in the follow-up interviews indicated that they preferred to do their own shopping, even though the commodity package benefits were worth more than their food stamp benefits.

"I wanted to buy my, get what I... I mean I only get \$10, so... just to get what I want for \$10." [A client in Connecticut]

More clients in Connecticut cited the weight of the package as a reason for not participating than did clients in North Carolina. The weight of the package was an issue in Connecticut from the start of the demonstration because many clients did not have cars. (This was in contrast with the North Carolina demonstration, where most clients were able to find transportation.)

Figure IV.3: Sources of Information About the Demonstration

Note: Clients could identify more than one source.

*Significantly different from Connecticut (alpha = 0.05).

The ways that clients learned about the demonstrations differed between the two commodity demonstration sites (Figure IV.3). In Connecticut, most clients learned about it through a letter (37.5 percent) and/or through a friend (21.8 percent). Only 17.2 percent of clients heard about the demonstration from their caseworkers—this is consistent with a finding reported earlier that caseworkers did little to provide information about the demonstration (see Chapter II). Alternatively, in North Carolina, almost half (47.9 percent) of clients were told about the demonstration by their caseworkers. Friends and promotional letters/brochures were less common sources of information about the demonstration in North Carolina.

Table IV.4: Characteristics of Elderly Clients by Demonstration Participation Status

	Percent of Respondents with Characteristic		
	Total	Never Received Commodities	Received Commodities
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Gender			
Male	27.3	27.8	24.5
Female	72.7	72.2	75.5
Prior Participation in FSP ^a			
Yes	73.2	75.0	61.8*
No	22.9	20.8	35.6*
Don't Know/Refused	3.9	4.2	2.6
Race ^b			
White	59.3	59.9	55.8
Black or African American	33.0	30.4	47.6*
American Indian or Alaska Native	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Asian	2.9	3.3	0.2*
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Other	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Hispanic Origin	36.0	39.8	14.2*
Household Members Over Age 60			
One	89.7	88.9	94.2
More than One	10.3	11.1	5.8
Recently Received Free/Reduced Cost Meals	6.2	5.8	8.5
Recently Used Food Bank/Food Pantry	8.4	7.6	12.4
Self-Rated Health Condition (Compared with Other Seniors Their Age)			
Excellent/Very Good	7.3	6.2	13.8
Good	24.7	24.7	25.1
Fair	44.2	46.4	31.8
Poor	23.2	22.1	29.3
Don't Know/Refused	0.6	0.6	0.0
Follows Special Diet	47.0	48.0	41.3
Requires Help with Personal Care Needs	19.0	20.3	12.1*

^aIndividuals were considered to have had prior participation if they responded that they had ever received FSP benefits before August 2002.

^bRace categories not mutually exclusive.

*Significantly different from those that never received commodities (alpha = 0.05).

n.a.: Unweighted sample size too small to generate reliable estimates.

Table IV.5 Characteristics of Demonstration Participants by Demonstration Site

	Percent of Respondents with Characteristic			
	Connecticut		North Carolina	
	Total	Received Commodities	Total	Received Commodities
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Gender				
Male	29.2	40.0	17.7	14.5*
Female	70.8	60.0	82.3	85.5*
Prior Participation in FSP ^a				
Yes	73.5	53.5	71.9	67.1
No	22.4	44.7	25.8	29.7
Don't Know/Refused	4.1	1.8	2.3	3.2
Race ^b				
White	60.5	65.6	52.9	49.5
Black or African American	30.3	43.2	47.0	50.5
American Indian or Alaska Native	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Asian	3.4	n.a.	0.0	n.a.
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Other	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Hispanic Origin	42.7	36.4	0.3	0.0*
Household Members Over Age 60				
One	89.3	92.8	92.0	94.8
More than One	10.7	7.2	8.0	5.2
Recently Received Free/Reduced Cost Meals	5.7	8.3	8.8	8.6
Recently Used Food Bank/Food Pantry	8.1	18.6	9.7	8.5
Self-Rated Health Condition (Compared with Other Seniors Their Age)				
Excellent/Very Good	6.5	10.4	11.6	16.0
Good	24.8	29.2	24.4	22.4
Fair	45.9	25.9	35.2	35.5
Poor	22.2	34.5	28.4	26.0
Don't Know/Refused	0.6	0.0	0.4	0.7
Follows Special Diet	48.5	48.7	39.0	36.6
Requires Help with Personal Care Needs	19.5	8.9	16.4	14.1

^aIndividuals were considered to have had prior participation if they responded that they had ever received FSP benefits before August 2002.

^bRace categories not mutually exclusive.

*Significantly different from commodity recipients in Connecticut (alpha = 0.05).

n.a.: Unweighted sample size too small to generate reliable estimates.

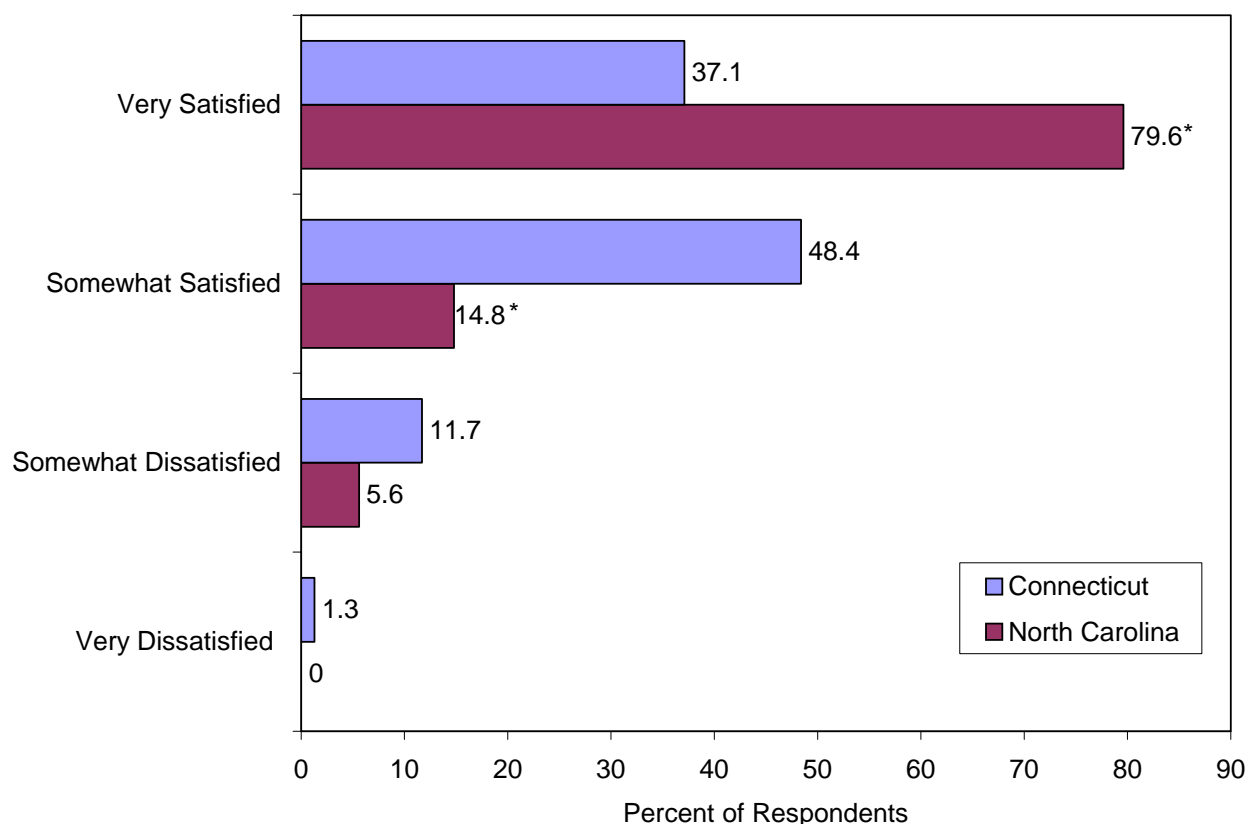
Characteristics of Commodity Recipients

Like most elderly FSP participants, seniors in the commodity demonstrations were predominantly female. In both demonstration sites combined, about 73 percent of the households participating in the survey had a female head of household, and among those households that ever received a commodity package, the percentage was 76 percent (Table IV.4). Differences in gender were apparent, however, when examining the demonstration sites individually. Among survey respondents in Connecticut, 71 percent of household heads were female, and only 60 percent of the heads of households that participated in the commodity demonstration were female (Table IV.5).

Demonstration participants were more likely than non-participants to be new to the FSP. While 23 percent of all respondents had no prior FSP participation experience, 36 percent of respondents that participated in the demonstration were new to the FSP. The proportion demonstration participants with no prior receipt was higher in Connecticut than in North Carolina, but the difference between the Connecticut and North Carolina proportions was not statistically significant.

Black clients participated in the commodity demonstration at a disproportionately high rate. Among all respondents, 48 percent of those that participated in the demonstration were black, compared with only 30 percent of those who never participated in the demonstration. Higher rates of participation among blacks were observed in both Connecticut and North Carolina. In fact, the proportion of demonstration households that had a white household head and the proportion that had a black household head were not significantly different between Connecticut and North Carolina. In Connecticut, over 40 percent of respondents were in households with an Hispanic household head, and 36 percent of households participating in Connecticut's demonstration had an Hispanic household head. In North Carolina, less than 1 percent of respondents were in households with an Hispanic household head.

No significant differences were observed in the percentage of households with only one person over age 60 (94.0 percent among all demonstration participants), the percentage who recently had received free or reduced cost meals (8.5 percent among all demonstration participants), or the percentage who recently had used a food bank or food pantry (12.4 percent among all demonstration participants). Respondents also were asked to rate their health condition compared with other seniors their same ages. Differences in the distribution of responses were not significantly different between those participating in the demonstration and those not participating. However, demonstration participants were significantly less likely than nonparticipants to indicate that they required help with personal care needs.

Figure IV.4: Client Satisfaction With Overall Commodity Package By Demonstration Site

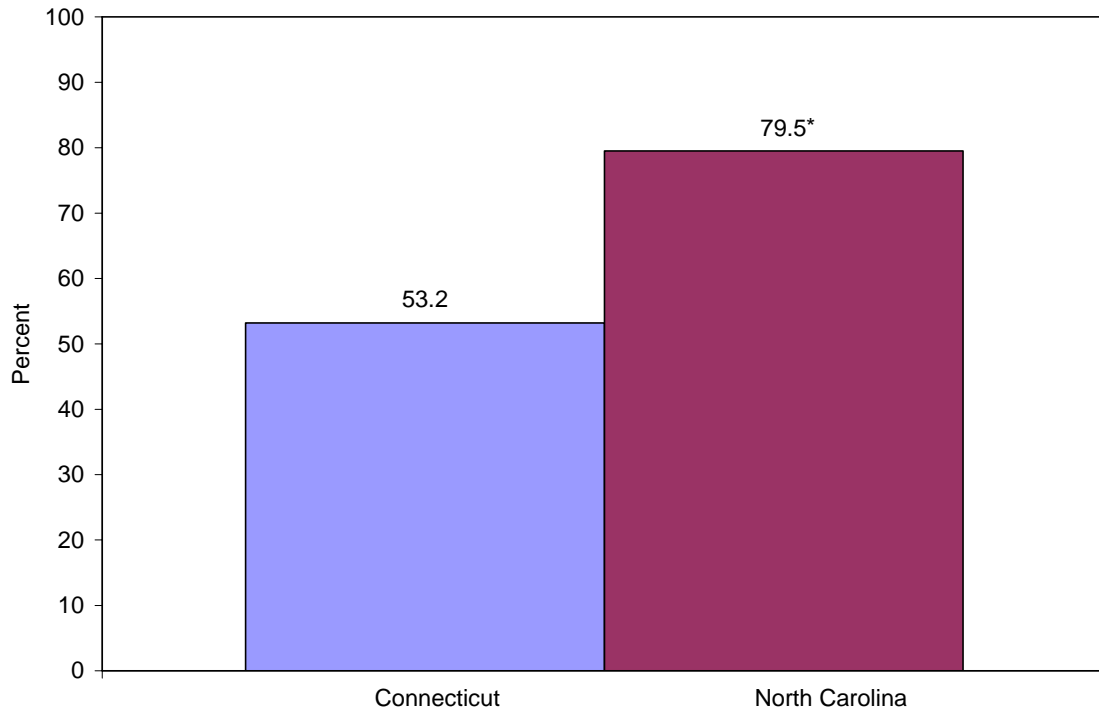
Note: Percentages do not sum to 100 because some respondents did not answer question.

*Significantly different from Connecticut (alpha = 0.05).

Satisfaction with Commodity Demonstration

When asked how they rated the overall commodity package they received, clients in North Carolina gave consistently higher ratings than did clients in Connecticut. In both states, the majority of clients were either “very satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied” with the package, with a small proportion voicing dissatisfaction (Figure IV.4). However, the fact that—relative to North Carolina—a significantly higher proportion of clients in Connecticut were “somewhat satisfied” instead of “very satisfied” may indeed provide evidence of dissatisfaction. As discussed in Chapter II, of the roughly 300 households that participated in the demonstration in Connecticut, almost half switched back to receiving regular food stamp benefits—an important sign of dissatisfaction. (It is important to note that clients generally switched back after nine months of participation, while they responded to this survey after about three months of participation.)

Figure IV.5: Percent of Respondents That Intended To Continue Participating in the Commodity Demonstration



*Significantly different from Connecticut (alpha = 0.05).

This additional evidence suggests that either a large proportion of clients who said they were “somewhat satisfied” were actually dissatisfied with the demonstration (and were unwilling to tell that to the interviewer), or that they eventually became dissatisfied with the demonstration some time after the interview. There is some evidence that they actually were dissatisfied at the time of the interview. When clients were asked whether they intended to continue participating in the demonstration, only about half of clients in Connecticut said they would, compared with 80 percent of clients in North Carolina (Figure IV.5). In both states, among those who indicated they would not continue participating in the demonstration, about half had already switched back to food stamps at the time of the interview (not shown).

One key source of dissatisfaction among demonstration participants was the loss of control over food selection. When the respondents who indicated they were somewhat or very dissatisfied were asked why they were dissatisfied, most indicated that they did not like the kinds of food in the package and that they preferred to select the foods themselves. This echoes the reasons given by those elderly FSP participants who never participated in the commodity demonstrations, and it appears to be a reason for dissatisfaction and nonparticipation at both demonstration sites. Follow-up interviews with dissatisfied clients

confirmed that control of the shopping experience was a major source of their dissatisfaction:

“I’m dissatisfied with the quality and that it’s always the same thing, and I’m a variety eater.”
[A client in North Carolina]

“With the food stamps, you can... go buy exactly what [you] want.” [A client in Connecticut]

“I didn’t want it because I don’t eat no canned goods... I was raised on the farm and we had all green food and stuff like that... I’m a very picky person... I like it best when it is fresh and [I can] cook it my way.” [A client in North Carolina]

Another likely source of dissatisfaction in Connecticut was the staff who distributed packages and with the package distribution process itself. Clients in Connecticut tended to be less satisfied with the demonstration staff that provided the packages than did clients in North Carolina. In North Carolina, 90 percent of respondents indicated they were “very satisfied” with the staff, compared with only 56 percent in Connecticut (Table IV.6). The package pickup process itself received similar ratings: 89 percent of clients in North Carolina were very satisfied with the distribution process, compared with only 58 percent of clients in Connecticut. These differences in satisfaction with the distribution staff and process likely help explain why clients in Connecticut were less satisfied overall with the demonstration than clients in North Carolina.

Again, the frustrations with the staff and the distribution process in Connecticut were emphasized by respondents who participated in the follow-up interview:

“When he went down there to ask questions and nobody knew anything, that’s what was confusing.”

“They put the [commodity packages] in the dining area... Anybody can come in there. The bags are there, you know...I have seen people going in other bags, taking out what they wanted, something specific they wanted out of that bag that evidently their bag didn’t have, you know.”

Clients who were relatively new to the FSP (that is, those who had not participated in the program prior to August 2002) were far less satisfied than clients who had prior experience (Figure IV.6). Only half of clients new to the FSP indicated that they were “very satisfied” with the demonstration.

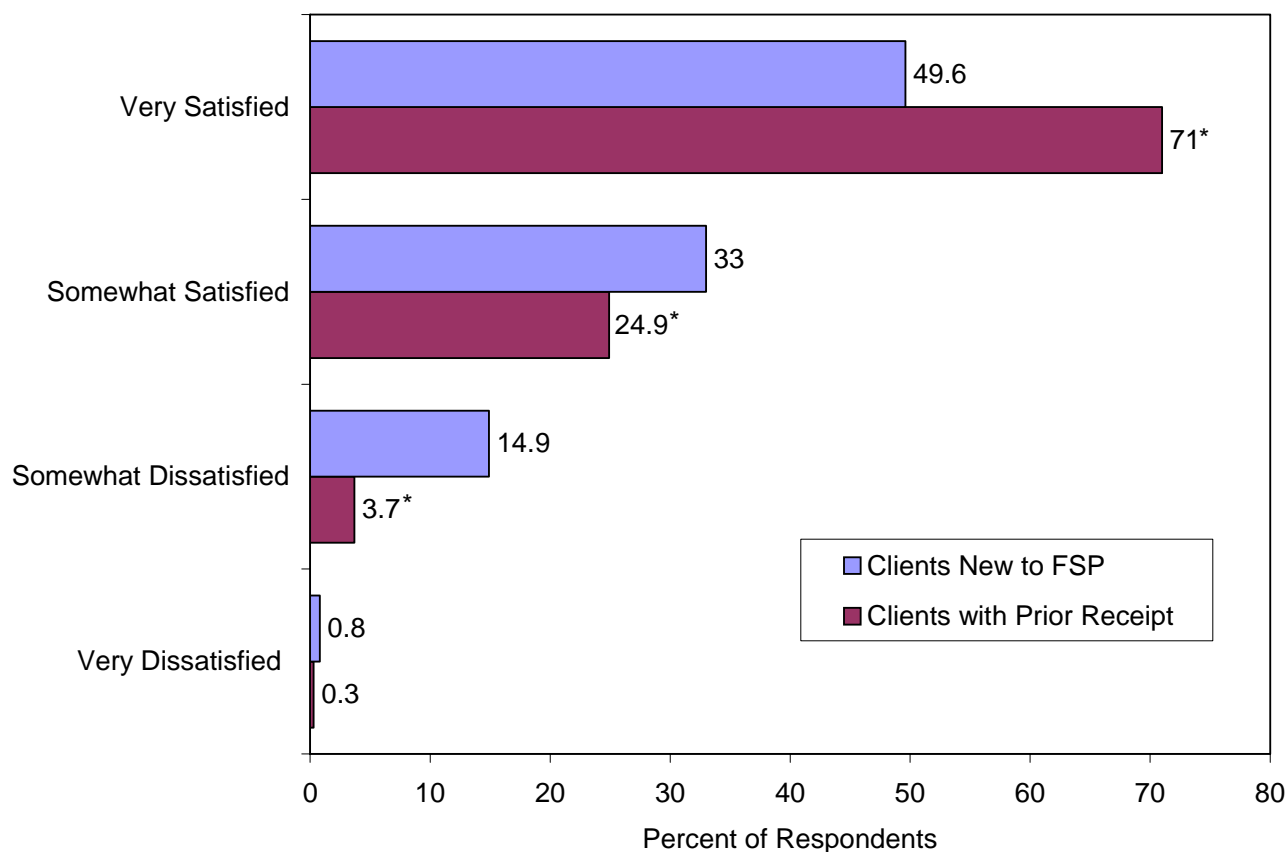
Table IV.6: Percent Distribution of Client Satisfaction Ratings By Demonstration Site

	Connecticut	North Carolina
Satisfaction with Staff that Provided Package		
Very Satisfied	55.6	89.5*
Somewhat Satisfied	41.0	7.6*
Somewhat Dissatisfied	0.0	0.8
Very Dissatisfied	0.7	0.7
Don't Know/Refused	2.7	1.4
Satisfaction with Picking Up Package		
Very Satisfied	57.9	89.2*
Somewhat Satisfied	27.4	9.6*
Somewhat Dissatisfied	0.7	0.0
Very Dissatisfied	14.0	0.0*
Don't Know/Refused	0.0	1.1
Satisfaction with Amount of Food in Package		
Very Satisfied	61.6	79.6
Somewhat Satisfied	24.4	13.1
Somewhat Dissatisfied	2.0	4.4
Very Dissatisfied	10.7	2.9
Don't Know/Refused	1.3	0.0
Typically Use All Food	43.2	70.4*

*Significantly different from Connecticut (alpha = 0.05).

CONCLUSIONS

On the whole, clients were quite satisfied with the Elderly Nutrition demonstrations. The demonstrations were designed to reduce the burden of applying, reduce the stigma of participating, and in the case of the commodity demonstrations, increase the usefulness of the benefit. Clients confirmed that these issues were barriers to participating in the program, and by their own accounts, they concluded that the demonstrations helped reduce these barriers.

Figure IV.6: Client Satisfaction With Commodity Package By Prior Receipt Status

*Significantly different from those new to FSP (alpha = 0.05).

Note: 1.6 percent of clients new to the FSP did not answer the question on satisfaction.

The role of demonstration staff was central to the clients' satisfaction. At the application assistance sites, clients were pleased with the helpful and courteous application assistants. Clients felt that the demonstrations restored dignity to the process of applying. In two sites—one application assistance site (Pinal County Arizona) and one commodity demonstration site (Connecticut)—where the staff-client interactions were not always positive, seniors had less favorable assessments of the demonstration. Indeed, these two sites also were the two that had no apparent impact on participation (see Chapter III).

Among other subgroups of participants, few differences in satisfaction existed. Satisfaction ratings examined by health condition, income, and Hispanic origin are presented in Table IV.7. In each case, the distribution of satisfaction ratings for one subgroup was not significantly different from that of another.

Table IV.7: Percent Distribution of Client Satisfaction Ratings By Subgroup

	Health Condition	
	Good, Very Good or Excellent	Fair or Poor
Satisfaction with Commodity Package		
Very Satisfied	66.9	60.5
Somewhat Satisfied	29.3	27.1
Somewhat Dissatisfied	2.6	11.4
Very Dissatisfied	0.5	0.5
Don't Know/Refused	0.7	0.5
	Monthly Income	
	Income <\$750	Income >=\$750
Satisfaction with Commodity Package		
Very Satisfied	67.9	54.9
Somewhat Satisfied	26.7	29.3
Somewhat Dissatisfied	4.2	15.8
Very Dissatisfied	0.8	0.0
Don't Know/Refused	0.4	0.0
	Hispanic Origin	
	Hispanic	Not Hispanic
Satisfaction with Commodity Package		
Very Satisfied	38.8	36.0
Somewhat Satisfied	28.2	60.0
Somewhat Dissatisfied	27.4	2.8
Very Dissatisfied	1.5	1.2
Don't Know/Refused	4.1	0.0

*Differences across subgroups significantly different from zero (alpha = 0.05).

Clients also confirmed that explicit outreach efforts were a key component of the demonstrations. At sites with well-defined and effective outreach efforts, clients received the message that the demonstrations were trying to convey. However, in programs with problems related to outreach, clients appeared more likely to learn about the demonstrations through happenstance and were less aware of key demonstration themes.

In the two commodity demonstrations, satisfaction appeared driven by two issues. First, where the commodity distribution process was smooth and staff interactions were positive, clients who participated showed more satisfaction than in programs for which the process and the interactions were problematic. Second, clients who preferred to select their own groceries either did not participate in the demonstration or were dissatisfied with the demonstration if they did participate.